

## CAUTION! Stress can be Harmful to Your Health

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"Caution: Stress Can Be Harmful to Your Health," AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER April-May 1986

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### **Article:**

M. D. Magazine and The New York Times have reported that musicians live to an average age of only fifty-four years! Compared to the three score and ten enjoyed by everyone else, those fifty-four years are painfully brief. A host of theories have been advanced to explain this sad phenomenon, but one glaring fact stands out: musicians suffer a higher incidence of coronary related deaths than does the general population, and among all the risk factors associated with coronary heart disease, stress plays the most influential role in an abbreviated life-expectancy.

As crucial as proper nutrition and exercise are to the music educator's health, the significance of stress as a contributor to degenerative diseases such as coronary heart problems cannot be overstated. Sources of stress permeate every nook and cranny of the music educator's work environment. Musicians at all levels and settings are faced with a plethora of stress inducers, among which are:

- (1) excessive work demands complicated by full teaching loads, church jobs, professional meetings, practice time, etc.;
- (2) recurrent deadlines, such as competitions, recitals, and rehearsals;
- (3) changing work schedules that frustrate a sense of routine and stability;
- (4) uncertainty regarding work responsibility and coworker inter-action; a special problem for music educators in school settings;
- (5) job security confronting all musicians who have financial obligations;
- (6) responsibility for students: a concern to many a sensitive music educator;
- (7) destructive competition too often rearing its head in the music community;
- (8) a poor work setting such as inadequate lighting and ventilation, lack of privacy, and intrusive noise, disturb many music educators;
- (9) interaction with stressful, aggressive colleagues or students often perpetuating the same destructive behavior in others; and
- (10) sexual harassment occasionally surfacing as a problem for women in academic settings.

While no list could ever completely catalog all the threats to the music educator's professional and personal equanimity, it does suggest the pervasive rainbow of stress activators in music education. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports that music education ranks high among the most stressful

occupations. The music educator must learn to cope with stressful situations in such a way as to diminish their negative impact.

People tend to respond to stress in one of two ways. By far the most prevalent and harmful response has been called "Type A" behavior. Researchers, in fact, claim that 75 percent of the population falls into the Type A category; a higher percentage may well be typical of music educators. Type A personalities are characterized by an overly zealous competitive drive and combative ambition, a reservoir of hostility and anger, a sense of furious haste and dispatch, impatience, and a pursuit of several tasks at once. Type A behavior stems most often from a hidden lack of self-esteem, an acculturational rather than hereditary byproduct. Type A individuals seek to compensate for their false sense of incompetence via a constant anger that seethes just below the surface, ready to lash out at increasingly trivial happenings. A frequent tendency to lose one's temper while driving is a clear manifestation of this trait. Type A's often feel that their opinions are so sound and defensible that any challenge borders on heresy. Such individuals express irritation with opposing ideas and speak quickly, sometimes finishing sentences for others. Type A's are usually disappointed by their colleagues' inability to meet lofty standards, leading to a feeling of contempt for others. Additional Type A characteristics are a proclivity for enumeration; success and failure are measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively: "I have played more recitals, taught more students, published more papers than my rivals." Type A individuals also often carry note pads with them at all times in order to jot down ideas. Type A's hate to sit idly; relaxation begets guilt; fast walking and eating result; teeth-grinding and fist-clenching are dead giveaways. Perhaps most unfortunate of all from the standpoint of music education is the frustration of metaphoric thinking, or the ability to conjure up fanciful analogies and vividly descriptive adjectives to give life and meaning to a thought, or insight into a phrase. Teachers who can no longer mine a rich vein of metaphors in a quick and easy fashion have compromised a great deal indeed.

Severe Type A behavior can lead to burnout, a situation so chronic in the teaching profession that it has now reached crisis proportions. Burnout is precipitated by a feeling of heavy burden for which no happy outlet exists; withdrawal from the profession seems the only recourse. Far too many fine, productive music educators are being lost to this malady of stress. Preventing Burnout in Education (1981) by Christopher F. Wilson and Deborah L. Hall of the San Diego Department of Education superbly articulates this problem and sets forth a host of stress management skills.

The health risk of Type A behavior is well-documented. Research indicates that Type A individuals are seven times more likely to develop coronary heart disease and two to three times as likely to die from heart attacks as are nonType A's. Further, the link between Type A behavior and coronary heart disease has been shown to be not just associational but causal. Music educators who are concerned about the possibility of a shortened lifespan should heed the warning—Type A behavior and health do not mix! Type A traits, especially hostility, promote the secretion of a hormone called norepinephrine, an overload of which can lead to physical and psychological deterioration. An excess discharge of norepinephrine by the sympathetic nervous system reduces the blood supply to the liver, limiting that organ's ability to remove fat from the blood. The resultant additional fat coursing through the blood stream leads to a clumping of the red blood cells, a process known as sludging. Sludging in turn blocks the many small blood vessels throughout the body, including those in the heart, depriving it of a normal blood supply. The consequences may be migraine, high blood pressure, and coronary heart disease (heart attack, for instance). Such horrors ought to provide the requisite impetus for a rejection of Type A characteristics. Happily, a life-saving alternative, known as Type B behavior, awaits those who have the wisdom and courage to pursue it.

The most significant difference between Type A and B behavior hinges on the possession of adequate self-esteem, an often elusive commodity in the music education profession. A sense of self-esteem is not calibrated by past achievement but rather by one's own expectations. Inner peace comes only when expectations are in perfect balance with one's capacities. The Type B individual can work as hard as his Type A counterpart; the difference is that Type B's regard occasional failure not as defeat, but as a natural outcome in some instances. Satisfaction requires only that one did his best. The measurement of self-worth shifts from an extrinsic gauge

and desire to impress others to an intrinsic focus with an attendant desire to please self. Type As should realistically assess their capabilities and realign their ambition and goals to achieve a better fit. Until the fractured self-esteem is mended, all the pernicious characteristics of Type A behavior will continue to thrive. Further, Type Bs control their hostility by constantly reminding themselves that most errors and mistakes are not worth getting upset about. Type Bs smile at other people and laugh at themselves; they find quiet time for contemplation; they delegate authority while granting their surrogates freedom to operate without constant supervision, all in a realization that the same end can be accomplished in more ways than one; and they can be assertive without being aggressive. Type Bs also simplify their lives by eliminating the superfluous activities that occupy so much of the Type A's time, thus freeing themselves for more enriching and nourishing activities, such as taking an interest in the lives of others and concentrating on the things worth being as opposed to the things worth having. Type Bs repudiate the accent on quantity and value instead of the quality of work, interests, friends, etc. Type Bs find time to savor an aesthetic experience; Type As are usually too busy. Music educators above all should not be guilty of this last sin, but they often are. Musicians must indulge in verbal imagery and metaphoric thought if they wish to perform or teach. Type Bs enhance their spirit by dreaming such dreams.

The good news is that Type A behavior can be modified, thereby significantly diminishing the chances of an early death while injecting new joy into daily life. The first step involves a recognition of Type A traits in one's own behavior. Many people believe that if they exhibit only mild Type A symptoms, they are immune to the consequences. They are dead wrong. No continuum connects Type A and Type B; they are dichotomized polarizations and are mutually exclusive. An individual can be either Type A or Type B, but he cannot be in between. Within Type A behavior, though, there exists a spectrum of severity proportional to the immediacy of a person's anger. The second evolutionary step demands a commitment to dispose of old bad habits. This process seldom proves easy and may take a year or more. The rewards, though, are well worth the trial. Specific change activities the music educator can pursue include:

- (1) schedule a few minutes of quiet, private time in the morning and evening and several times during the day devoted to pleasant, soothing activities that are divorced from work or ongoing problems; for instance, listen to music, read a book, or just relax; never teach or practice for long blocks of time without a break;
- (2) never engage in two or more activities simultaneously; while teaching a lesson, for instance, try not to think about a hundred other things; give your mind and students a break;
- (3) talk slowly and refrain from finishing other's sentences or hurrying them along with an "un-huh";
- (4) leave note pads at home; take a chance on forgetting something;
- (5) try to ignore work, practice, etc., during off-hours; learn to relax;
- (6) spend at least one evening a week with friends, prohibiting any discussion of music;
- (7) develop interests and skills out-side of music; never put all your eggs in one basket;
- (8) smile at a student or colleague at least five times a day; grin and bear it;
- (9) at least once a day laugh at some-thing that would have previously elicited instant fury; and
- (10) be open to the ideas of others; compromise now and then.

Such suggestions can lead to greater fulfillment and joy. Far more importantly, though, they can save lives. Type As frequently try to defend their behavior by arguing that if Type Bs ruled the world, progress and initiative would come to a screeching halt. Nothing could be more untrue. Type Bs can work long and hard;

they simply refuse to become martyrs. Type A behavior crosses the fine line that separates enthusiasm from impatience, and impatience often results in mistaken judgement, domination of others, and misdirected energy. Type As also perpetuate their frenzy upon others, a potential problem of which music educators must be acutely aware in their influence upon students. Anyone who doubts that a Type B individual can succeed in a big way needs only to look at Ronald Reagan. Type Bs do not have to finish last.

No one disputes the fact that a modification of Type A behavior can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease. While no advice, no matter how sound, can provide a guarantee of immunity to heart attack, the Type B approach holds promise of being the brightest and best advice yet advanced. Allied with a prudent diet that encourages the consumption of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains while limiting cholesterol, salt, sugar, and fats of all kinds, Type B behavior can lead to significantly reduced risk of premature death. Incidentally, all types of fats, including unsaturated varieties such as corn oil, will in combination with the stress hormone norepinephrine produce the dangerous condition known as sludging. This same danger is synergistically compounded by cigarette smoking. Smoking stimulates norepinephrine production, damages the lining of arteries in the heart, legs, and feet, and creates the extreme peril of lung cancer. Regular but moderately prudent exercise has also proven to be important in combating coronary heart disease. An hour of mild aerobic exercise every day, such as walking, in which the pulse rate does not rise above 125 beats per minute, seems to be the safest plan.

All music educators have reason to be concerned about a life-expectancy of only fifty-four years. That is the bad news. The good news is that a behavioral modification from Type A to Type B characteristics will reduce that dastardly risk. Everyone can improve his or her own health and in turn encourage others to do the same. Colleagues can influence one another, teachers can influence students, and vice versa. The means are at hand. Postponement is folly; deferred gratification wilt never flower. Let us each become prophets for this timely wisdom. We can do no better for ourselves or our fellows.